

The City with No Heart

[Where's the heart of LA?]

CAL: The Hollywood sign.

DANNY: It's the most viewed sign in the world, it beats the Eiffel Tower. And don't say the Santa Monica pier.

CAL: Downtown.

DANNY: Downtown isn't where L.A. is.

CAL: It's not. L.A.'s on Sunset between Doheny and Highland. It's the Sunset Strip, and Wes knew that because he put that right in the title.

DANNY: Hey, I would love to do the Strip, but if you think about it, it's made up almost entirely... of billboard ads.

(Aaron Sorkin, "The Option Period," *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*)

Flying over Los Angeles is strange. For a while there's nothing but mountains. Then a few curving strips of conformist suburbia. And then, all of a sudden, there it is. Rows and rows of building with no apparent structure or direction, just going everywhere at once. Unlike every other city I've seen from the air, LA has no gradient surrounding a downtown. It just suddenly appears and then is simply there.

Downtown looks about the way you'd expect. Lots of tall buildings, studded with odd landmarks like the new Gehry-designed concert hall and a giant ocean liner-looking building which we determined to be the DMV. ("Only in California does the DMV get its own ocean liner," someone says.) But this wasn't really LA, my guide explained. "Downtown is just hollowed out factories and sweatshops. Gentrification is coming, but it's only at the very early stages." We pass an American Apparel sweatshop. "American Apparel is a Rebel Company" the staid building reads in Spanish.

We zip past old and new buildings while zooming on the freeway and head to Venice, a land of small streets and surprisingly-elegant beach shacks. The famed Venice Beach looks just like you'd imagine — LA always makes you think you are imagining — with shirtless skateboarders and gritty little shops and the beautiful blue ocean up against the clear blue sky — both so vast, so endless.

I lie down on the sand and close my eyes. When you're trying to relax, everyone always says to imagine you're on the beach by the ocean with the sun streaming down upon your face. But here I actually am and I still can't relax. Instead, I wonder about the fractal nature of coastlines — does their length grow with out bound or simply converge as you measure them more finely? ([It grows without bound.](#))

My host is danah boyd, the beautiful young academic superstar who has won fame and fortune formalizing the teens on MySpace, then reporting her findings at conferences in wildly colorful outfits with youthful enthusiasm. She's living an academic dream — a one bedroom house by the beach filled with books, with a handsome but quiet young boyfriend to drop by on occasion.

But such a life is not all relaxation. She's editing special editions of journals, keynoting conferences, submitting papers hither and yon, consulting on teen issues for major corporations, and interviewing kids for her research. Even *The O'Reilly Factor* is in on the racket, asking her, in that rhetorical way O'Reilly has of interviewing guests, whether MySpace is a dangerous den of online sexual predators. (It is never mentioned that O'Reilly's parent company has purchased MySpace.)

danah delights in pushing academic boundaries: skipping classes, skipping town, spelling her name in lower case, wearing crazy clothes, studying the subcultural and new. And the rest of the field is scrambling to catch up with her, finally holding conferences and submitting papers on the sites she's been studying for years. I should become an academic, she says. Shake up the system just like her. But why join the system in the first place?, I say.

She's got a fellowship down here this year along with Cory Doctorow, who shows up, arms wide, in a beaten leather jacket and a skullish t-shirt. We grab barbecue down the street, taking Cory's car (the first one he's bought in his 35 years), outfitted with fuzzy seats and new plates that read "COPYFYT."

Cory hates San Francisco, but loves it here, where he gets to teach classes with names like "Pwned: Is everyone on this campus a copyright criminal?" The freeway is fast, he says, the light rail usable, the cities surprisingly walkable. Disneyland is close by and there is plenty of '50s kitsch. And it's far cheaper living here than in London.

Cory is his usual flurry of activity — working on six books, teaching two classes, running one of the most popular blogs, fighting for our digital civil liberties, while still managing to keep up with all the gossip. He hands me an advance proof of a book to read and recommends another he's in the middle of. And on his way out he stands, framed in the doorway, and offers me a piece of advice.

"You know," he says, "*Wired* really isn't so bad. It's an exciting time in tech industry — the cost of starting a company has fallen drastically — and you're at the center of it. I would have loved to have a job at *Wired* when I was 18." "Wired was very different when you were 18," I say. "Yeah, I suppose so," he says. "I guess I wouldn't want a job there now — but then again I wouldn't want a job *anywhere*."

And then he's off.

As Cory leaves Jeremy Iversen arrives. Iversen is an incredibly odd fellow. With a background in everything from investment banking to neurotheology, he came to my attention with his 2006 book [High School Confidential](#). With a novelist's snark and an ethnographer's attention to character and institutional detail, he went undercover to a Southern Californian high school for a half a year and wrote the whole thing down with a rare authorial brilliance. ([My review.](#))

Now the book's out and he's moved on again. This time he's trying to join Hollywood, perhaps play himself in the movie version of the book. He is sleek and abnormally attractive, but I learn this is the result of a spectacularly careful regimen. Every four hours he takes a carefully measured amount of food out of a cryopack in his car, pretty much the only food he is permitted. Then he follows a daily three-page jargon-laden series of instructions from his trainer about which

exercises to perform and how at the gym. This, combined with cold reading and audition classes, is now his job.

It seems like a waste, but just like danah likes messing with institutions, Jeremy likes trying new things. “I’ve done a fiction book, I’ve done a nonfiction book, I’m done with writing,” he says. Fair enough; Jeremy amazes me with his many talents. Aside from his good looks, his thoughtful eye, and his talent for writing, he’s one of the smarter people I’ve spoken to lately, cracking jokes about Yugoslav loyalty and information-theoretic channel errors.

He also has amazing interpersonal skills. While danah and Cory bowled me over with their energy, leading me to sit quietly while they braindump news and gossip, Jeremy’s energy somehow invites my own, leading me to crack jokes and make snarky comments right along with him. Perhaps this guy truly can do anything. Although that only leads to another question: why?

I hop in Jeremy’s car (the very same the kids in his book were in!) and he takes me on a tour of the city. First stop is Santa Monica and the Santa Monica Pier, home to a sewage treatment plant (which lots of signage brags about) and the fortune telling machine that kicked off the plot in *Big* (I didn’t have a quarter to get my fortune, sadly). The crosswalk machines here talk and the stupid shopping mall jobs inspire television pilots. There are large topiary dinosaurs along a promenade with gingerbread houses underneath them to suggest Christmas. (Since the weather doesn’t change, the city has to indicate the season in more blatant ways.) There is an entire store dedicated to selling things to geeks, with golden chess pieces mixed in among the lightsabers and *Lord of the Rings* figurines. The wealthy pretty things stroll back and forth.

Meanwhile in Westwood, home of UCLA, we see more shops and [Fox Theater](#), home to many important movie openings. The students sit in cafes, pretending to work but actually checking Flickr, while Jeremy insists I get a tazo milk tea with boba. I do, against my instincts, and, to my surprise, it’s actually quite good. Then we go back to strolling around LA’s imitation of a college town. In most places college towns are kind of a step up from the surrounding environs, but in LA it seems the town is trying to slum down a bit to fit the mold.

We head to Beverly Hills, singing the appropriate songs (*living in Beverly Hills*), and get out to stroll along the famed Rodeo Drive. [A giant nude torso](#) inexplicably welcomes us to a strip with shops so upscale that the streetlights have been replaced by chandeliers in glass boxes. Well-dressed women carry their fashionably tiny dogs in Prada bags while trendy young people sit in trendy restaurants, looking vaguely unhappy.

Side streets curve off into a world of cobblestone steps even more immaculately clean than the main drag — not a speck of dirt can be found anywhere. And then we find ourselves in the most bizarre three-story mall contraption, with an elevator that goes two floors above any surrounding buildings, three restaurants bathing unhappy people in pink, orange, and green light respectively, closed shops selling pink, orange, and green boxes, and a large glassed-in bedroom suspended literally in the center of it all, with no apparent way to get in. Jeremy was convinced we were in some kind of adventure game — if only we deliver the pink boxes to the people in pink and so on, we’d unlock the elevator which would bring us to the key to get into the magic bedroom. But then the polygons stopped rendering so smoothly and we decided to move on, as I began to wonder if I’d stepped into some Virtual Reality simulation.

Everything in LA looks so, well, cinematic. I always thought that filmed stuff looked better than my stuff because they used fancy lights, cameras, and lenses to give it that more lushful aesthetic. But apparently all you really need to do is turn your camera on in LA — everything here gives off that hyperreal, oversaturated vibe.

And the people are all characters too. When I went down to Venice Beach, I saw attractive women sunbathing on towels while reading scripts. While walking back, I heard a couple guys excited that the casting director had actually called them back this time. The only other people I saw on the street with identifiable occupations (and there are a shocking number of people wandering around the street in the middle of the day with no identifiable occupation) were the immigrant landscapers busily trimming hedges on the houses of their betters.

I walked a block too far on the way back and ran into a more dingy neighborhood by a runned-down church. I looked around, trying to get my bearings, and a poor-looking black man on a bicycle with a cup rode up. “Sorry,” I said, assuming he wanted me to place some money in his cup. “Can I help you find anything?” he asked. “No,” I said. “What’re you doing?” he asked. “Just looking around,” I said. “Looking for anything in particular?” he asked. “No,” I said. “Looking for... crack?” he asked. “No,” I said again, and he biked off.

“Crack is our number one industry,” Jeremy says, “with entertainment and shipping as our secondary sectors.” Apparently the whole city does coke, perhaps the one thing that unites these disparate neighborhoods, this collection of varied enclaves each with their own name and culture that we call Los Angeles. Not all of them, Jeremy explains, are even part of Los Angeles City. Some of them have received special dispensation to carve out their little plot of land and get their own mayor. Santa Monica even elected a Green.

We head towards Sunset, stopping to see a large bubbling pit of tar in the middle of the city, right next to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where even more high society people are standing around looking unhappy, glassed in from the rest of the world — and the tar.

We also stop to see the world’s tallest Christmas tree at The Grove shopping mall. Aside from one of the early flagship Apple stores, the Grove also has a trolley to take people around the outdoor mall. There’s little objective need for the trolley — the mall isn’t that big — but, as Jeremy says, it just adds to the surreality. To complete the picture, I couldn’t resist purchasing a cinnamon sugar pretzel.

And then we head to Sunset. There is the Laugh Factory, where Michael Richards recently dealt a large blow to his career. There are trendy clubs and music spots. And there are, of course, billboards; plenty of billboards, advertising this and that as the street curves every which way.

Soon things start to calm down and it’s time for Jeremy to drop me off and hit the gym. We turn around, waving goodbye to all that. “And that’s LA!” he says, as I clutch my chest and feel like my head is about to explode.

The afternoon before I have to leave, I’m lying on the couch, my headache failing to fade. Time rolls forward and I notice from the orange glow leaking through the window that im gonna miss the sunset yet again. I hop out and run the four blocks to the beach as fast as I can, dodging traffic all the way.

When I get there the sun has fallen below the horizon but framed before me is the majestic beach picture I’ve always seen in photos. The darkened sand, the glowing water, the crimson orangered strip fading up and to the edges, as if the sun had set directly in front of where I’m now facing.

I run towards the water and the lights and sounds and people of the city all fall away and I find my self entirely alone with the ocean. The waves run right up to the edge of my toes but don't touch them. I stand, its colors and sounds enveloping my entire field of vision, its scent filling my nostrils. I breathe in deeply.

The reflected sunlight before me refracts to form a perfect rainbow, strips of dark red fading into orange fading into yellow then light blue then blue. And for one beautiful moment, before the whole thing fades away into an inky blackness, the colors are laid out perfectly, just the way I've seen them in prisms and diagrams so many times before, a beautiful sympathy of color. And then my head really does explode, the beauty sending shockwaves through my body.

That is how I will remember LA: this beautiful strip of sunset.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

December 5, 2006